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ABSTRACT

This study of the narratives of 48 black, low-income, urban kindergartners examined the frequency of topic-centered style (a discourse centering on a single topic) and topic-associating style (a discourse of personal anecdotes or episodes whose connections are never overtly stated). The children were from four classrooms in two schools in Pontiac, Michigan, a lower working class suburb of Detroit. The storytelling task was conducted between the child and a familiar adult interviewer. Results revealed that 16 children told topic-associating stories and 28 told topic-centered stories. Of the topic-centered narratives, 10 were retellings of familiar storybooks. Results appeared to refute earlier studies that concluded that black children show a preference for a topic-associating style. Story transcripts, and a list of 27 references, are included. (MM)

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# Black Kindergartners' Spoken Narratives: Style, Structure and Task

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Short form of the title: Black Kindergartners' Spoken Narratives

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Abstract

This paper discusses narrative styles of 48 black low-income urban kindergartners. The starting point for this study is the work of Michaels (1981, 1986; 1991) who found that during an activity known as "sharing time," black first graders tended to produce narratives which did not cohere around single topics but around series of unclearly related episodes, a style Michaels called *topic associating*. This was in contrast to the white first graders who Michaels found used a "literate," *topic centered* style. The results of the present study, however, revealed that of the 48 children, 16 told topic associating and 28 told topic centered stories. Of the topic centered narratives, 10 were retellings of familiar storybooks. Results show that Michaels' findings were only partially replicated with younger, urban black children. Task differences are discussed.

Black Kindergartners' Spoken Narratives:
Style, Structure and Task

In the past decade, much research in linguistics and language study has focussed on issues of orality and literacy. A number of researchers have considered the ways speech and writing may differ in English (Beaman, 1984; Chafe, 1982; Jarrett, 1984) as well as non-Western languages such as Japanese (Clancy, 1982) and Chinese (Li & Thompson, 1982). Others, however, have extended this discussion of orality and literacy to analyzing differences *within* a given mode of discourse. For example, in spoken discourse, particularly spoken narrative discourse, researchers have focussed on comparisons of narrative styles of speakers coming from so-called "oral" and "literate" cultures. Scollon and Scollon (1981) characterized the narrative storytelling tradition of Athabaskan Indians as being "oral" in contrast with the Western "essayist prose" tradition typically used by Canadian or US middle-class speakers of English. Similarly, Tannen (1982) described differences between the "interactive," oral narrative style of Greek women and the more "content-focussed," literate style of American women.

Researchers have also considered possible implications that oral and literate styles of narrating may have in educational contexts. Several, in fact, have reported that less literate narrative styles are often devalued in the classroom. Scollon and Scollon (1981) have remarked that it is the essayist style literacy which is promoted in Western schools, and that "the Athabaskan set of [spoken] discourse patterns are to a large extent mutually exclusive of the discourse patterns of essayist prose" (p. 53). Also, although

Heath (1982) argued against a dichotomy of oral and literate traditions, she noted that black working class children in a community she studied had a "non-mainstream" narrative style which led to difficulties in certain classroom literacy tasks (pp. 69-70).

In a similar vein, Michaels (1981; 1986; 1991) found that the "sharing time" narratives of a group of first grade black children[1] were treated as poor discourse by their teacher since they deviated from the teacher's model of literate narrative. In the classroom which Michaels studied, "sharing time" was an activity in which children described an object or important past event in front of the class, with other class members and the teacher being allowed to ask questions or make comments.

Michaels observed that the white children in the class tended to produce sharing time discourse that was "tightly organized, centering on a single topic or closely related topics" (1986, p. 102). This discourse style Michaels called "topic centered." In contrast, the black children in her study tended to use discourse which did not cohere around a single topic but rather consisted of a series of personal anecdotes or episodes whose connection to one another "was never overtly stated but had to be inferred," a narrative style she called "topic associating" (1981, p. 429). Michaels argued that topic associating stories did in fact contain structure and thematic cohesion but that these were "implicit" rather than explicit, and were thus much less apparent to the teacher. Hence, unlike the white children's topic centered stories, the black children's narratives were difficult for the teacher to follow since they did not adhere to the conventions of literate narrative cohesion (1986, p. 102).

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[1]Michaels and Cazden (1986) also studied second graders, but our focus is on the younger children.

As Michaels' study suggests, there is potential for negative evaluation or stigmatization when the communication style of a particular group is assessed as lacking explicit structure and cohesion. In fact, children's narratives which lack connections to a central topic have been characterized as being less developed by Applebee (1976). He called narratives which have the form of free association "heaps," one of the earliest forms of narrative organization. Another structure, which he called an "unfocussed chain" is somewhat more advanced but still lacks coherence to a central point. Both heaps and unfocussed chains were differentiated from "true narratives." Lack of coherence then may be associated with immature speech.[2] Such a stigma may also be attached to discourse labeled as "topic associating" which has been characterized as lacking the explicit style of coherence esteemed by the schools.

The labeling of black children's narratives as following an oral rather than literate tradition may itself carry a further stigma of incoherence. Gee (1985; 1991) has noted that the oral narrative tradition is frequently described in a negative light--usually "in terms of what it lacks that the literate style has. It is inexplicit where the literate style is explicit, it is less well integrated than the literate style, less syntactically complex and so on" (1985, p.11). He commented that the description of black children as topic associating "is ripe for the application of a 'deficit model': [that] these children tell these sorts of stories because they don't know any better" (1985, p. 12). Hence, although Michaels argued that topic associating stories do in fact demonstrate a system of logic and coherence of their own, the fact that they are categorized as

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[2]Incoherent speech has sometimes even been extended to characterize mental disorder. For instance, the discourse which has been called schizophrenic has been described in past research as lacking connections to a central topic (Rochester & Martin, 1979).

deviant from a literate standard has negative associations. Generalizing her findings to all black children might thus imply that black children are limited to a non-standard style of narrating.

Besides being stigmatizing, the idea that a certain community is limited to a single, "oral" speech style may not be accurate. That is, within certain genres, supposedly oral cultures may use speech registers associated with a modern literate tradition. Indeed, several studies suggest that black speakers may shift between a number of different speaking styles according to context. Both Abrahams (1970, 1972) and Labov et al (1968) have found that in particular speech events, blacks may use styles of speech known as "talking sweet" or "rifting" which are closer to formal, oratorical styles of standard English than to the everyday vernacular. If one considers these formal varieties of English to be more closely associated with the Western "literate" tradition, then it appears that black speakers are clearly capable of possessing a literate style in their speaking repertoire. In the same way, it may be that black children are not necessarily strictly limited to a single, "oral," topic associating narrative style.

One of the purposes of the present study, therefore, is to examine the extent to which a topic associating style can in be found in other groups of black children in different narrative contexts. Although Michaels observed a topic associating style in black children within the context of sharing time, it may be that another group of black children would display a more "literate," topic centered style in a different narrative task. The paper, therefore, will report on the frequency of topic centered and topic associating styles among a group of black, urban kindergartners, and will discuss the possible influences the task at hand may have had on the children's narrative styles.

## Method

### Subjects

This study used 48 narratives elicited from kindergartners in Pontiac, Michigan--a lower working class suburb of Detroit. The children were from from four different classrooms in two different schools. The storytelling data were collected as part of a larger longitudinal study (Sulzby, 1989; Sulzby, 1990; Sulzby and Kamberelis, 1990) of the development of emergent literacy of kindergarten through first grade children in five urban elementary schools.

In the four classrooms, 81% the children who were enrolled and present for the storytelling elicitations were black, 64 out of 79 children. Since the main purpose of the study was to assess the frequency of topic associating narratives among black kindergartners, only the black children's narratives were used. (The question of how the black narratives compared with those of other ethnicities in the classroom might be reserved for another study.) Of the 64 black children in the classrooms, 7 refused to tell a story even after several prompts. Two other stories were inaudible and 3 were on missing tapes. Also, 4 other stories were omitted, one that was less than four clauses long and three produced as songs. This left a total of 48 narratives for the study.

### Elicitation

The storytelling task was conducted in a one-to-one fashion between the child and a familiar adult interviewer. The adults had previously visited the classroom for 3-5 days as observers and had not yet been identified to the children as interested in literacy. Children were taken to a small room in

which two chairs had been arranged to face each other. The child was introduced to the idea of using a tape recorder to help the adult remember what the pair said to each other and was promised to be allowed to hear the recorder at the end of the session. The adult sat facing the child, without anything in his or her hands. Adults had been trained in nonverbal as well as verbal means of eliciting face-to-face narration. Each child was asked to tell a story and then the adult waited with an attentive look at or near the child's face. The child was asked to tell a story about a topic of his or her choice, with a general framework of its being a previous experience. Specifically, the interviewer's prompt to the child was **"Today, *child's name*, I want you to tell me a story. The story can be about something fun or exciting that you've done or anything else you want to tell about."** Other than that, as little input as possible was given by the interviewer during the narrative production. Occasionally, if the child was "stumped," the interviewer offered story topic suggestions like "tell me a story about something fun you did with your family or about all the things you do when you play on the playground." Some of these suggestions may have encouraged the children to narrate habitual as opposed to past event sequences. These cases were noted in the results.

## Analysis

Each of the kindergartners' transcribed narratives were categorized into one of the two narrative types described by Michaels (1981; 1986; 1991). Details of the actual classification process follow a presentation of Michaels' category criteria. In Michaels' study, the categories *topic centered* and *topic associating* were characterized by a number of features which have been summarized in table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Michaels described topic centered narratives as being tightly organized around a single object or event. Temporal and locative information remained consistent throughout topic centered narratives, which helped to give them the appearance of having a singular thematic focus. Such narratives achieved thematic cohesion through repetition of key lexical items which were often related to familiar cultural routines such as sports or major holidays (Michaels, 1981, p. 428). Moreover, Michaels and Cazden (1986) noted that the structure of the topic centered narratives demonstrated a linear pattern of organization, having "a marked beginning, middle and end" (p. 136) and followed a sequence of events leading to some resolution. In some examples, they noted that the stories followed a standard narrative format with an orientation, complicating action and resolution, though not all the topic centered examples contained these elements (Michaels & Cazden, 1986, pp. 142-143).

In contrast, topic associating narratives were characterized not by a linear development around a single topic but by a series of unclearly related anecdotes or episodes. Unlike topic centered stories, topic associating stories were marked by frequent shifts in time, location and key characters. However, Michaels emphasized that these narratives were not without thematic cohesion. She argued that the "'topic associating' style...consists of a series of segments or episodes which are *implicitly* [my emphasis] linked in highlighting some person or theme" (1986, p. 103). However, because the connections between episodes were never explicitly stated, topic associating stories appeared *on the surface* to be without linear structure or thematic

focus, to have "no beginning, middle or end and thus, no point at all" (1981, p. 429).[3]

In categorizing the Pontiac narratives, we attempted to apply Michaels' criteria as closely as possible, paying particular attention to lexical repetition, temporal and locational grounding, thematic shifts, and linear organization. Perhaps more than Michaels, we extended the notion of a "linear progression of information" to include adherence to a standard narrative canon of the kind proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967). Also, one aspect of Michaels' classification system that was not included was her analysis of prosodics in topic centered and topic associating narratives. Although intonational cues were not analyzed formally in the present study, they were used by the two raters on a holistic basis.

The process of placing the stories into the two categories involved the first author listening to each story on tape 4-7 times, taking notes on the presence of features relevant to the topic centered or topic associating categories, and transcribing each story. All the transcripts were checked by a minimum of 4 transcribers. From the notes and transcripts, the narratives were placed into one of the two categories by two raters (the first author and another researcher working on a related paper). The inter-rater reliability was 87.5%. Of the 6 children the raters disagreed on (12.5%), easy agreement was reached in 3 of the cases after short discussion. The other 3 disagreements were due mainly to different opinions about whether a child's reference to a new character signalled an abrupt topic shift. In calculating the frequency of

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[3]We should note that later, Michaels and Cazden (1986) changed Michaels' original category name "topic associating" to "episodic." However, since they did not change their description of this category notably, we have chosen to keep the term "topic associating" for this analysis. The switch in classification terms may in fact reflect different assumptions about the cognitive processes behind such narratives, but this is an issue for another discussion.

the narrative styles, the disagreements were resolved by using the first rater's judgements. Examples of the two narrative categories are discussed first in the results section.

## Results

These black kindergarten children produced both topic associating and topic centered narratives when asked to tell stories. Before we discuss the frequency of the two narrative styles, we will illustrate representative narratives from the topic centered and topic associating categories, respectively. A few notes about the transcripts: each line represents a new clause; "A" stands for adult interviewer; "X" stands for inaudible, with each "X" equivalent to one syllable. False starts and hesitations have been omitted. All of the children's names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Example 1, *Steven*, Topic Centered

1 the house was fired up

2 then the fire truck came

3 then they had that water spray in there, and stop, and got burned-ed up

4 but it was up there to the house

5 it went up

6 it went over

7 and then it sprayed again and again

8 and they stayed over there that long

9 but they was go move their house

10 but this fire up, but it aint burn no more

Steven's narrative, categorized as "topic centered," is a story about a fire being extinguished. Notice that nearly every clause in Steven's narrative is related to a single topic of firefighting: the arrival of the fire truck (line 2), the spraying of the fire hose (lines 3, 4-8), and finally the extinguishing of the fire (line 10). This singularity of theme gives Steven's narrative the appearance of topic centeredness. Moreover, the narrative follows a linear structuring of events characteristic of a topic centered style, with a complicating action, or "high point," (the house on fire/firefighting) and a resolution (the fire being extinguished).

Thematic cohesion in Steven's narrative is also wrought by the repetition of key lexical items. In this narrative, we see the repetition of "water spray/sprayed" (lines 3, 7), "fire" (lines 1, 2, 10), and "burned-ed/burn" (lines 3, 10). Moreover, these words relate to a salient concept in our cultural experience--firemen putting out a fire--which, according to Michaels, also lends topical cohesion to a story (Michaels, 1981, p. 428) Thus, the singularity of theme, linear organization, and lexical repetition give Steven's story its topic centered style.

Example 2, *Spencer*, Topic Associating

1 Yesterday I went down home

2 and I was sleep

3 and I ask my mamma

4 I was telling her a story about Goldilocks

5 and she say, "mm mm"

6 she didn't want me to tell her no Goldilocks story

7 I was about to say it all to my own self

8 and now yesterday it was dark

9 and Lynn went over there a long time

10 and Lynn went over Gramma's

11 and she came

12 she was about to go back over my house

13 and she fell down on the porch

14 and she had one of those pills

15 and one of those bumps was right on there

16 and X peeled off too

17 and now she laid in the bed

18 my mamma had to get her some ice

19 and I went over Gramma's to spend the night

20 and I had to go to school

21 and I got a little baby cat and a big cat

22 the baby cat is gone somewhere

23 I need to go find her

24 but the big cat just stay over my house

25 and I just pet him

26 the little baby don't bite

27 and the big one don't bite me

28 and yesterday I went to the pizza roller skate party

29 and the Little Caesar's X

30 and I was at home

31 I had my birthday

32 and I could read all my books

33 and I do my homework

34 and I got this

35 play with Randall

36 and I play with my toys

37 and I could read my book all by myself

38 'cause my mamma teach me how to read the jungle book

39 and I just read it

For reasons of space, we have selected only the first 39 clauses of Spencer's narrative, which in its entirety was 156 clauses long. Indeed, such lengthiness may characterize the topic associating style. None of the topic centered kindergartners told narratives anywhere near this long. The longest topic centered narrative, told by Lisa (described on p. 17) was 35 clauses. Michaels' study also suggested that the black first graders topic associating narratives had a lengthy appearance. She noted that the children's "[sharing] turns were often cut short by the teacher who jokingly refered to them as 'filibusters' on occasion" (1986, p. 102). However, it is difficult to assess the actual length of the topic associating stories in Michaels' classroom since they *were* so often cut off mid-stream by the teacher.

Spencer's story illustrates a topic associating style in that it involves not just a single topic but a number of different anecdotes which are not overtly related temporally or thematically. There are frequent shifts in time-frame, location and characters. Spencer begins his long narrative by telling about how he tried to tell his mom the Goldilocks story one night (lines 1-7). Then, in line 8, he shifts to another anecdote about a new character Lynn (perhaps a close relative), who went over to Gramma's house and fell down the porch (lines 9-18). This anecdote is perhaps connected temporally to the Goldilocks episode since they are both marked as occuring "yesterday" (lines 1, 8). However, the events do not follow a linear sequence, since the first anecdote appears to occur at bedtime ("I was sleep" line 2) and the second

earlier in the evening. The relationship between the two episodes is thus not explicit, either thematically or temporally. There is no connecting phrase, such as "before I went to bed, Lynn..," which links the two anecdotes. Michaels noted that this "absence of lexicalized connectives" is characteristic of a topic associating style (1981, p. 429).

In line 21, there is a definite shift in theme and time-frame as Spencer switches to talking about his cats (lines 21-27). His storytelling here is also no longer grounded in the past but in the habitual present. He describes the present states and attributes of his cats: "The baby cat is gone somewhere," "the little baby don't bite."

After the cat sequence, Spencer shifts back again to the past with "yesterday I went to the roller skate party" (line 28). Here, Spencer may be using "yesterday" as a general past event marker, not specifically referring to a particular day. Peterson (1990) reported that young children often use "yesterday" in this way. In any case, the party is not explicitly related to the "Goldilocks" or "Lynn" episodes, which were also said to occur "yesterday," or to the "cats" anecdote.

Lines 30-39 switch settings again from the roller skate party to his home. Spencer does seem to continue the "party theme" in line 31 by saying "I had my birthday" (presumably in his home) but the relationship between this and the other party is not clear; they appear to have occured at two different places and at two different times, and are only linked loosely to a general party theme. Recall that Michaels argued that these types of "implicit" connections to a theme were the way thematic development was achieved in topic associating stories. Moreover, the connection to the party theme is not continued for long; lines 30-38 focus on the activities Spencer did some time in the past in his home, which besides the party included:

reading books, doing homework, and playing with toys. Thus, all of these frequent thematic shifts in Spencer's story gives it its topic associating appearance.

Frequency of the Narrative Styles

Since all of the narratives in the Pontiac data were produced by black children, one might have predicted from Michaels' findings that they would tend to adhere to a topic associating style. Indeed, one would especially expect the Pontiac kindergartners to display a topic associating style since they were one school year or more younger than Michaels' first graders and thus much less developed in terms of their classroom narrative skills. However, as shown in Table 2, out of the 48 narratives, there were 16 topic associating stories (33.3%), 28 topic centered stories (58.3%), and 4 (8.3%) stories whose category membership was not clear enough to be assigned. Thus, more than half of the narratives followed a topic centered style, which Michaels had said was characteristic of white, and not black, first graders' stories.

Insert Table 2 about here

This next section will address the issue of the number of topic centered stories produced by the Pontiac children. We will first present examples of three types of topic centered narratives produced by the kindergartners, and will then discuss the possible influence the storytelling task or genre of the present study had on producing more topic centered narratives than was evidenced by Michaels' first grade, black children during "sharing time" activities.

## The Topic Centered Stories

The kindergartners' topic centered stories appeared to fall into three categories: retellings of familiar storybook-type narratives, past experience narratives and habitual experience narratives. The narratives in the category "other" were those that did not clearly fit into one of the three main categories. The numbers of topic centered stories in each of the categories are outlined in Table 3. We will discuss examples of each type in turn.

Insert Table 3 about here

### Storybook Retellings

Of the 28 children classified as topic centered, 10 retold familiar storybook narratives. Lisa's example below illustrates a retelling of the "Three Little Pigs" story.

Example 3, *Lisa*

1 once upon a time three little pigs
2 off they ran on the road
3 they said "bye" to their mother
4 they saw some hills of bricks
5 they said, "will you give me some bricks
6 so I can make me a house"
7 they made them a house
8 then the big bad wolf came knocking on the door

9 he said, "would you let me in"

10 said nope by my shinny shin shin

11 say I will huff and puff and blow your house down

12 then he saw some man with some sticks

13 he said, "would you give me some sticks

14 so I can make me a house"

15 he made him a house

16 then the big bad wolf came knocking on the door

17 said, "would let me in, let me in"

18 said, "nope by my hair of shinny shin shin"

19 said, "I will huff and puff and blow your house down"

20 so he did

21 he saw some man with some bricks

22 then he said, "would you give me some bricks

23 so I will make me a house"

24 he made him a house

25 then the big bad wolf came knocking on the door

26 said, "would you let me in, let me in"

27 said, "no by my shinny shin shin"

28 said, "I will huff and puff and blow your house down"

29 he tried and tried and tried

30 but he couldn't

31 he said, "I meet you down at the apple tree 5 o'clock"

32 little pig was cooking to eat

33 then the big bad wolf came knocking on the door

34 he was rolling down the hill

35 he went up through the chimney, fell in the hot pot

36 and the little pig lit a fire over him

37 that's the end

Lisa's narrative follows the original storyline of the "Three Little Pigs" throughout, containing the major narrative elements defined by Labov and Waletzky (1967), such as an orientation, which introduces the characters and the setting of the events (line 3), a complicating action consisting of three episodes in which the big, bad wolf threatens the pigs (lines 8-11; 16-20; 25-30), and finally a resolution when the wolf falls into the hot pot (lines 35-36). Following Michaels' description of topic centered discourse, there are no thematic shifts away from the central storyline, nor are there shifts in the story's temporal sequence of events. Lisa's close adherence to a single storyline gives it its topic centered appearance.

Moreover, her narrative also conforms to a number of structural and linguistic features from the original storybook. Since these are familiar to the the listener, they further contribute to the narrative's thematic cohesiveness. Lisa uses the parallel, rhyme-like structure of the "Three Little Pigs" story. Each of the three house-building episodes has the same basic structure. They begin with one of the pigs seeing a man with bricks or sticks, then a piece of dialogue in the form of "Will you give me some bricks/sticks so I can make me a house," then the clause "they/he made him a house," and then finally a description of the pigs refusing to let the wolf in and the wolf threatening to blow the house down.

In these episodes, one can also see that Lisa's story contains much of the original story's language and phrasing. Note the presence of the wolf's familiar line, "then I will huff, and puff and blow your house down," (lines 11, 19, 28) as well as the phrase "nope by the (hair) of my shinny shin shin" (i.e. "not by the hair of my chinny chin chin") (lines 10, 18, 27). Thus, Lisa's close adherence to the event sequence, structure and storybook language of the "Three Little Pigs" story lends to its appearance as a literate-style narrative focussed around a single topic.

One might argue that familiar story retellings would be better categorized separately from both the topic centered and topic associating narratives since they are based at least in part on children's knowledge of the original storybook structure rather than on ways of structuring personal experiences. However, story retellings were included in the categorization because they were, in fact, narratives that were produced in response to the narrative task, which neither specified nor encouraged the retelling of a familiar literary narrative. Moreover, not all of the stories were direct retellings of a storybook like Lisa's. Some of the children (described below) narrated only selected parts of the original story. They also used their own style of language in their tellings, giving their stories the quality of being unique attempts at structuring a narrative rather than just verbatim repetition of stories they have heard before.

The following child, Anthony, told a narrative based on the familiar "Goldilocks" story. Although Anthony's narrative reflects his own language style and differs somewhat from the traditional storyline, it nevertheless coheres around a linear story grammar structure.

Example 4, *Anthony*

1 once upon a time there was three little bears, the middle size bear, and the papa bear, and the small bear

2 and went out

3 and the Goldilocks ate up all their food

4 and tried everybody thing, and they bed, and they soup, and they chair, and they bed

5 and she finally got her a nice bed

6 that was the baby bed

Note the presence of Anthony's own Black dialect in his narrative: the use of the third person plural pronoun "they" instead of the standard English possessive adjective "their" as well as the colloquial construction "got her a nice bed." Also, Anthony tells the Goldilocks story from an original angle, leaving out the traditional scenes where the bears return and find Goldilocks in their home. This narrative, therefore, appears to be Anthony's own version of the Goldilocks story.

However, his narrative does follow a linear story grammar schema. Using Labov and Waletzky's model of narrative components, we see that Anthony's story contains an orientation section where he introduces the characters with the formulaic storybook opening "once upon a time there was three little bears." Moreover, although his story deviates somewhat from the usual plot structure, it nevertheless contains a complicating action centering around Goldilocks entering the bears home and trying "everybody thing," as well as a resolution coming at the end of the story when Goldilocks finally finds a nice bed to sleep in. Again, the fact that Anthony's story follows a

linear narrative organization and does not include any seemingly unrelated anecdotes gives it a topic centered appearance.

Past Experience Narratives

Ten of the kindergartners told past experience narratives which were classified as topic centered. In the category of "past experience" we included any narrative grounded in the past that was not a retelling of a storybook. In some cases, it was not clear if the narrative was from the child's own or someone else's past experience that he/she had heard about. Steven's narrative about firefighting on page 11 is an example of a topic centered, past experience narrative.

Habitual Experience Narratives

The final category of topic centered narratives told by the kindergartners were habitual experience narratives. Labov (1972) excluded these types of accounts from the category "narrative" since they did not revolve around a set of events in the past. However, other researchers have included habitual event discourse in their definitions of children's developing narrative. (Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Peterson, 1990) Hudson and Shapiro have called certain habitual event narratives "scripts." They asserted that script narratives, which are accounts of familiar event sequences such as going to the doctor, are the first type of narrative discourse produced by children (usually by age three).

Five of the kindergartners told habitual type topic centered narratives. Most of them described a series of frequently occuring events in activities such as play time or school. One kindergartner, Nikia, describes the different things she and a friend do when they are playing:

Example 5, *Nikia*

1 I play with my friends

2 sometimes we play on the dirt and make a castle

3 and we pile all the leaves and jump in it

4 and we run around and play a game

5 we play two games

6 that's all

Nikia's narrative is centered around a single topic. Each of the clauses in Nikia's story describe events occuring during playtime: playing in the dirt, making a castle, piling up leaves, and playing games. Moreover, as in Steven's story earlier, topical cohesion is achieved through lexical repetition of the words "play" (lines 1, 2, 4, 5) and "game" (lines 4-5) as well as the repetition of the simple construction "we + verb phrase" in every clause except the closing "that's all."

Indeed, some of the promptings of the interviewers may have encouraged some of the children to tell habitual experience narratives. As mentioned in the method section, when the child said he/she did not know a story, the interviewer would occasionally offer story topic suggestions which revolved around habitual events such as "something fun that you do with your friends" or "about playing." These types of prompts were used in 4 of the 5 cases of habitual experience narratives.

## Discussion

### Frequency of the Narrative Styles

In this study, we did in fact find that a number of these kindergarten-aged black children (n=16) used a topic associating style. This confirms that within an uninterrupted storytelling task, the discourse style Michaels found with black first graders was also present for some of these children. However, in contrast to what might have been predicted from Michaels' study, the topic associating style was not predominant among the present group of black children. The majority of the kindergartners (n=28) did not demonstrate a topic associating style but rather tended to adhere to the patterns of topic centered discourse. Even if we exclude the 10 storybook type narratives as being formulaic repetitions, 18 of the 48 narratives are clearly topic centered, which is still slightly more than the 16 topic associating narratives.

### Possible Effects of Task

One reason for the differences in results between Michaels' study and the present analysis may be due to differences in the narrative tasks. Here we will consider the characteristics of each of the narrative contexts. The activity of sharing time is a formalized type of dialogue in many classrooms. Michaels reported that in the classroom she studied, sharing time had some "ground rules" laid down by the teacher, such as talking about "one thing" or something that was "very important." It was also conducted in a special setting--with the children sitting on the rug listening to one of their peers. Sharing time was also interactional; Michaels said that during a child's sharing turn, the teacher and other children often interjected with questions and comments (Michaels, 1981; 1986). Hence, because of its somewhat

interactional nature, the sharing time activity may have been interpreted by the black first graders as allowing for a less "school-like," or less literate style of discourse.

In contrast, the task presented to the Pontiac kindergartners was designed to allow the children to tell a complete story without interruption. Indeed, in this way, it had the potential of increasing the likelihood of children telling fully embellished, topic associating narratives. However, the prompt "tell a story" may have suggested to the children a more literate, "topic centered" schema of narrative than did "sharing time"--perhaps leading to the larger number of topic centered stories. Here, we will consider how the possible effects of the Pontiac task were reflected in the topic centered narratives produced.

As mentioned in the method section, the children were encouraged to tell a story about anything they wanted with an emphasis towards a personal experience narrative ("the story can be about something fun or exciting that you've done or anything else you want to tell about"). However, the very prompt "tell me *a story*" may have triggered a certain schema of "story" within the children, one modeled after a literate storybook genre of narrative. This storybook schema may have led some of the children to use a topic centered style which reflected the linear sequence and thematic cohesion of a book. The idea that the storytelling task was interpreted as a book-oriented one was most clearly reflected in the 10 children who re-told a familiar storybook narrative. Some of the children's metacommentary on these narratives further suggested that they saw the task as involving book-focussed storytelling. One child, Nicole, began the task by telling the interviewer about a book that she has. She said, " I have a book. It's about a little engine." After Nicole narrated the contents of this book, she told about

another book that she has: "I got a book about the kids at B___ Street," and described some the characters from that one. At the end of her narrative, she said "that's all the stories I know," suggesting that to her, telling a story means to tell about familiar books.

Indeed, three children also responded to the storytelling task by singing familiar songs: "Three Little Monkeys," "Old McDonald Had a Farm," and "Jingle Bells." These children were not counted in the analysis since they did not produce real narratives. However, the fact that they responded to the task with a song suggests that they may have seen the task as one which required the retelling of a formal, previously composed work much like a storybook.

Perhaps the most striking example of one child's strictly literate, "book-based" concept of "story" is found in Michael' narrative. The transcript begins with a long preamble between Michael and the interviewer.

Example 7, *Michael*

Adult: Michael, today I want you to tell me a story. The story can be about something fun or exciting that you've done or anything else you want to tell about. Tell me a story.

Child: I don't got none. And I ain't got no books.

Adult: Well, tell me a story. Tell me a story about something fun that you do at home or something fun that you do at school.

Child: We read stories at school.

Adult: Tell me a story.

Child: I don't know what's the name of them. But I don't know the words neither.

Adult: Well, you tell me a story. You tell me a story in your own way. It doesn't have to be a story from school. I want you to tell me a story.

Child: Can't guess.

Adult: Tell me a story about something fun you do with your family or something fun that you do with your friends.

Child: I can't guess nothing, shooooo.

Adult: Well, think, just think for a minute. Your own story, tell me.

Child: Can't guess

Adult: Tell me a story about something fun you do with your friends when you're outside.

Child: They don't have no books. Alls I got is Bibles.

Adult: Well, Michael, the story doesn't have to be about a book. The story, it's your story. You tell me a story about something fun that you do with your friends inside when you're playing or outside when you're playing, or something fun that you do with your family, or a story about something scary that happened to you.

1 three billy goats

[Adult: OK, tell me a story about three billygoats.]

2 I can't guess what the man was named

3 they had a frog and a bat

4 yeah, he was a troll

5 two little billy goats and one big one

6 the baby went across the bridge first

7 the troll caught it and said, "who's that trippin' over his bridge"

8 and he said, "the billygoat"

9 and he said, he said he was gonna go up there to get some free grass

11 and then he said XX

12 the billygoat gobbled the little one up

13 and that's the end of the story

In his interaction with the interviewer, Michael first begins insisting that he does not have a story or any books. He mentions that they read stories in school, suggesting that he associates "story" with written storybooks. Even after the interviewer encourages him several times that the story does not have to be about a book but about something from Michael' own life (about his family or about playing with friends), Michael continues to assert that stories are not for making up, or constructing on one's own. He says he doesn't know the name or words of any, and insists several times that you "can't guess," implying that for him, stories are narratives which are already established, most likely in print. Indeed, he even mentions that the only stories/books he has "is Bibles."

In the end, Michael does produce a storybook narrative about "the three billygoats" (a retelling of the familiar "The Three Billygoats Gruff") which reflects a quite literate, decontextualized style. One particularly notable element in his narrative is that he attempts to introduce or decontexualize each of the characters in the beginning of his story. He admits that he "can't guess what the man was named" (line 2) but he introduces him with the indefinite article in line 4 "he was a troll." He also gives some background information about the three billygoats--"two little billygoats and one big one." This type of explicit labeling of characters is a characteristic of a middle class, "mainstream" narrative style (Heath, 1982) and is often only seen in older children's narratives (Peterson, 1990). Again, narratives such as Michael's suggest that many of the children saw the task as one which required the telling of narratives modeled after the structure of books, which perhaps led to their topic centered style.

In the cases of the children who told topic centered, past and habitual experience narratives, it is perhaps not as clear whether the prompt *tell a story* suggested a book-like narrative schema leading to a topic centered style, since these children were not in fact telling a story from a storybook. However, these narratives did demonstrate that even within the genre of personal experience narratives, the kindergartners were not predisposed to a topic associating style within this task.

Indeed, in a *few* cases, the task to "tell a story" may again have encouraged the children to produce personal experience narratives which did reflect a literate or book-like style of coherent discourse, even though the story was from a personal experience. A particularly literate style was reflected in one past experience narrative told by Ieshai.

Example 8, *Ieshai*

1 once upon I time
2 I was living my mommy
3 my mom had two baby girls
4 one was Monique
5 and one was Ieshai
6 and the other one had the uh
7 my daddy was gone for the day
8 he moved
9 and he would call me back at two
10 and he said
11 everyday he calls me and sends money for me

Like the other topic centered narratives, this narrative develops around a linear narrative event structure, though one can assume that there were significant time lapses between each event in the sequence. First, the main characters--Monique and Ieshai--are introduced in the orientation (lines 1-5). The orientation also serves as the first event in the narrative, where Monique and Ieshai are born into this world. Lines 7 and 8 can be seen as the story's complicating event since they describe the removal of the father from the lives of these two girls. Finally, the narrative ends with a resolution to this crisis where Ieshai describes how despite her father's moving away, she is still cared for by him as he calls her everyday and sends money for her (lines 9-11).

Perhaps even more striking about this story, however, is Ieshai's use of the third person to refer to herself and her sister in lines 3 and 6. This type reference of the narrator towards him/herself has been described by Scollon and Scollon (1981) as "the fictionalization of self" and is said to be characteristic of literate-style narration. Scollon and Scollon argued that the removal of the first person voice of the author from the text is part of what characterizes a modern, Western style of essayist prose in which the author "seeks to achieve a state of self-effacement" and the text itself proposes to be the communicator of knowledge (pp. 48-49). As part of their study, they compared the narrative development of their 3 year old daughter, Rachel, who they said came out of a literate narrative tradition, to the "oral" storytelling style of Athabaskan Indian children. One element they noted in Rachel's stories which was not present in the Athabaskan narratives was this reference to herself as a third person character. Of Rachel's reference to herself they remark,

> "The character in regard to the author is a different person. It is a decontextualized person. . .This person bears a third person relationship to the author, and this consistent maintenance of the point of view is one of the hallmarks of written text." (p. 70)

This same "fictionalization of self" is achieved by Ieshai as she refers to herself and her sister as the "two baby girls--Monique--and Ieshai." Again, perhaps this more essayist prose, topic centered past experience narrative was more likely to occur in the present "tell me a story" task than in the sharing time activity in Michaels' study.

In sum, the way the storytelling task was interpreted by the children may be one reason why the Pontiac children's narratives appeared to follow a topic centered model of discourse more so than the black children in Michaels' study. In Michaels' classroom, the interactive nature of the sharing time activity may have led the children to use a less "school-like" narrative style like topic associating. Although the uninterrupted storytelling task used in this study in some ways should have increased the likelihood of children telling fully developed topic associating stories, the schema suggested by *tell a story* may have led a number of the kindergartners to produce topic centered narratives based on the structure and style of books. Even in the cases where the "storybook" effect of the task was less obvious, as in the habitual and past experience narratives, the children still showed a slight preference for topic centered discourse, thus suggesting that within this particular task, a topic associating style was not predominant even within the genre of personal experience narrative.

The ability of children to shift between different narrative styles according to task has been reported by other researchers as well. Although her study did not focus on oral/literate differences, Hicks (1991) found that first grade children used different narrative styles in different storytelling

contexts. The children in her study were prompted to narrate a film in three different ways--as a simultaneous event cast, as a factual news report and as a storybook narrative. Hicks noted that in each of these three narrative genres, the children demonstrated differences in perspective, event sequencing, and amount of evaluative commentary provided.

Similarly, Hudson and Shapiro (1991) reported that preschoolers, first graders and third graders included different structural elements in three types of narratives they were asked to produce: scripts (accounts of habitually occuring event sequences), past tense personal narratives, and original fictional stories. They noted that the preschoolers and first graders were aware of some differences between the three types of stories, although the third graders showed significantly greater genre awareness. Thus too, many of the Pontiac children may have been sensitive to a literate, "topic centered" genre of narrative which they interpreted to be appropriate to the task of "tell a story."

## Conclusion

Michaels' work with the first graders' sharing time narratives was key in helping to describe particular patterns of discourse organization found in a sample of black children's narratives. Indeed, her analyses have contributed a useful classification system for categorizing such narratives. However, Michaels' conclusion that black children show a preference for a topic associating style may mainly apply to tasks like sharing time. The fact that the Pontiac children produced more topic centered than topic associating narratives suggests that black children are not restricted to a predominant narrative style across different groups and tasks. Indeed, it is the authors' hope that future research will continue to expand our knowledge of black

discourse style so as to avoid the application of limiting labels and definitions. For it is only when we consider how contexts and genres interact with performance that we can establish a more accurate portfolio of the capabilities of individuals and their associated groups.

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**Table 1: Category Definitions**

| Topic Centered | Topic Associating |
|---|---|
| 1) Narrative is organized around a single object or event. | 1) Narrative is organized around a series of implicitly linked anecdotes or episodes. |
| 2) Temporal and locational grounding and key characters remain consistent | 2) Temporal and locational grounding and key characters frequently shift. |
| 3) Key lexical items are repeated. | 3) Narrative does not adhere to a linear pattern of organization. |
| 4) Narrative follows a linear pattern of organization– with a clear beginning, middle and end. | |

**Table 2: Frequency of Narrative Styles**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Topic Associating | 16 | 33.3% |
| Topic Centered | 28 | 58.3% |
| Other | 4 | 8.3% |
| Total | 48 | 100%* |

* Figures have been rounded to nearest tenth so total may not add up exactly to 100%.

**Table 3: Topic Centered Stories**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Storybook-Type Narratives | 10 | 35.7% |
| Past Experience Narratives | 10 | 35.7% |
| Habitual Experience Narratives | 5 | 17.9% |
| Other | 3 | 10.7% |
| Total | 28 | 100% |